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Ready or Not? The Royal Navy's Home Fleet at the Outset of World War II

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THE UNITED KINGDOM FACED three direct threats to its existence at the opening of World War II: the Luftwaffe's bombers, then-Captain Karl Doenitz's submarines, and the surface units of the German navy. German planes, at least in theory, could bomb and gas the British populace into submission. The U-boats and surface raiders of the German navy could cut off Britain's vital sources of supply. The Royal Air Force's Fighter Command was to oppose the first threat, and over time the Royal Navy's Western Approaches Command became primarily responsible for contesting the U-boat onslaught. However, should Germany risk an invasion of the British Isles or send its surface warships into the Atlantic as commerce raiders, the Home Fleet was to be the main line of defense.

Like all of Britain's services in 1939, the Royal Navy faced grave competing responsibilities and suffered from certain deficiencies. Outstanding works like Stephen Roskill's *Naval Policy between the Wars*, Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, N. H. Gibbs's first volume of the official *Grand Strategy* series, and Correlli Barnett's *Engage the Enemy More Closely* expound on the Navy's problems in the interwar years and describe the British Empire's shortfall in human, financial, and industrial resources in their broader strategic and economic contexts. Although these works have great merit, they tend to be global in their perspective. We can understand better the period that Roskill, Kennedy, Gibbs, and Barnett have analyzed by observing how specific deficiencies were exemplified in a single command—in this article, the Home Fleet. That is, how did Britain's relative decline as a world power affect one admiral in the performance of his duties?

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This article will discuss the state of the Home Fleet at the outset of World War II and the challenges its commander faced in carrying out his difficult assignment of keeping the Kriegsmarine bottled up in the German Bight. It will show how deficiencies like the slow relative speed of British warships, an insecure base of operations, the weakness of the Fleet Air Arm and Coastal Command, and poor intelligence hampered the effective exercise of British naval power in the operations of the Home Fleet at the opening of World War II.

Commanding the Home Fleet in September 1939 was Admiral Sir Charles Forbes. His career and personality deserve some exploration, for they influenced the Home Fleet's fortunes over the first ten months of the war. Forbes was a product of the late Victorian navy, having joined as a cadet at age fourteen. His family was from "out East," his father a merchant in Ceylon, where Charles was born in 1880. Forbes entered the Royal Navy's cadet training establishment, HMS Britannia, in 1894 and graduated two years later with five out of six possible first-class certificates for his superior examination results, a remarkable achievement. He became a gunnery specialist, receiving advanced training at the Royal Navy's gunnery school, HMS Excellent. At that time, one of the staff officers at HMS Excellent was a future First Sea Lord, Roger Backhouse. Forbes served on the staff of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, commander of the Grand Fleet at the battle of Jutland. In his service record Jellicoe would write that Forbes was "very capable, zealous, [with a] great knowledge of gunnery."[1] Forbes's flag lieutenant from his later days as commander in chief (C-in-C) of the Home Fleet described him as "always calm, always the same, and *always* correctly dressed," but, he added, "he hated publicity and the personality cult, and dodged both like mad."[2] This probably proved a serious handicap in an era that lionized William F. Halsey, Bernard L. Montgomery, and George S. Patton.

Charles Forbes followed Roger Backhouse up the ladder of command, rung by rung. On five separate occasions in his career Forbes replaced Backhouse or subsequently held the same appointment. First, Forbes replaced Backhouse as Jellicoe's flag commander (responsible for plotting the movements of friendly and enemy ships); he earned the Distinguished Service Order for his performance of duties aboard the *Iron Duke* at Jutland in 1916. Then for a short while their careers diverged. Forbes commanded the light cruiser *Galatea* from July 1917 to August 1919, witnessing the surrender of the High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow on 21 November 1918. From 1921 to 1923 he attended the Royal Naval Staff College at Greenwich. But their paths crossed again when Forbes became Director of Naval Ordnance one year after Backhouse left the job. In 1932, Forbes for the third time was sitting in a seat vacated by Backhouse, as Third Sea Lord and Controller, in charge of the design and construction of Royal Navy warships. In 1934, when Backhouse hauled down his flag as Commander, 1st Battle Squadron, and second in command of the Mediterranean Fleet, Forbes

hoisted his in the same billet. Finally, in April 1938, when Backhouse left the Home Fleet to become First Sea Lord, Admiral Forbes took his place as C-in-C, Home Fleet. This pattern—which is not likely to have been accidental—left Forbes in 1939 only one position to aspire to, and he was two years younger than Roger Backhouse. The opportunity to sit in the First Sea Lord's chair and run the Royal Navy must have seemed a likely and tempting prospect, all the more with Backhouse's getting the job in 1938. But it was not to be.

Backhouse died only seven monrhs into his tenure as First Sea Lord. It is quite probable that he had Forbes in mind as his successor, for the man who eventually replaced Backhouse as First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, had been informed in the summer of 1938 that he was to stay on as C-in-C Mediterranean Fleet until retirement in March 1940.[3] This strongly implies that Pound was not in line for the office of First Sea Lord at that time. Indeed, Admiral of the Fleet A.E.M. Chatfield, the First Sea Lord from 1933 to 1938, had been advised to pass over Pound as early as 1936, when Admiral Sir John Kelly, a former commander of the Atlantic Fleet, wrote to him that "D. P. [Dudley Pound] would not be a success [as First Sea Lord] in my opinion. In the first place, he suffers from being not quite a gentleman; a disastrous lacuna in a First Sea Lord. He is too pig-headed; too unwilling to recognize that there may be another side of the question."[4] Stephen Roskill has argued that Forbes would have been a reasonable choice as First Sea Lord when it became clear that Backhouse was too ill to continue at the job.[5] Certainly, Forbes enjoyed great experience, both as a staff officer and afloat. Considering the issue in retrospect, Admiral of the Fleet Lord John Tovey was to write, "In my opinion he [Pound] was neither a great tactician or [*sic*] strategist, and unfortunately he firmly believed he was. Charles Forbes was both and in every way better equipped [to handle the responsibilities of the First Sea Lord]."[6] Pound, nonetheless, had seniority and was therefore the safe choice for James Richard, Lord Stanhope, First Lord of the Admiralty and thereby political head of the navy, to make.

So it was that the not entirely able Pound, chosen from a limited pool of candidates, led the Royal Navy into the Second World War.[7] Because the British establishment had preferred the "safe" choice, the Navy went to war with a weak link at the top of its chain of command. Pound's disagreements with Forbes were to sour their relationship and make Admiral Forbes's job all the more difficult during his tenure in command of the Home Fleet.

When war came in September 1939, the Home Fleet was a powerful if heterogeneous force (see Table 1), comprising all of Britain's battle cruisers and five of the ten battleships ready for action. (The battleship *Valiant* was almost ready to recommission, but its sister ship, *Queen Elizabeth,* was still well over a year away from completing its modernization.) In addition, Forbes could send to sea one aircraft carrier, *Ark Royal* (a second, HMS *Furious,* was training aviators but could and would be made ready for normal operations); one heavy, five light,

Table 1
The Home Fleet, September 1939

2d Battle Squadron	*Nelson, Rodney, Royal Oak, Royal Sovereign, Ramillies*
Battle Cruiser Squadron	*Hood, Renown, Repulse*
Aircraft Carriers	*Ark Royal, Furious*
Antiaircraft Cruisers	*Calcutta*
Cruisers	*Aurora* (flagship, Rear Admiral Destroyers) 18th Cruiser Squadron *(Norfolk, Belfast, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Sheffield)*
Destroyers	6th Destroyer Flotilla (eight Tribal class) 8th Destroyer Flotilla (nine F class)

Source: ADM 187/1, the Royal Navy's "Pink Sheets," lists compiled during the war of all ships serving with the Navy.

Note: Edward-Collins's 2d Cruiser Squadron and attendant destroyers were temporarily detached and functioned, as they would from time to time, as an independent command.

and one antiaircraft cruiser; and seventeen modern destroyers, including eight of the big Tribal ships. Representative ships that operated with the Home Fleet during the first year of war are described in Table 2.[8]

The 2d Battle Squadron and the Battle Cruiser Squadron constituted the Home Fleet's "punch." However, this large concentration of big ships had its faults. Foremost was that two of the R-class battleships, *Ramillies* and *Royal Sovereign*, entirely lacked modernization and were therefore of modest value. The same could be said for the battle cruiser *Repulse*. It was more than a match for Germany's "pocket battleships" but was of doubtful use against the newer and bigger German warships. The battle cruiser *Hood* was a fine ship but needed improvements that, as fate would have it, were to have commenced in September 1939. With war imminent, it was simply impossible to take such a fast, powerful ship out of commission for two years.

Table 2
Specifics of Some Ships of the Home Fleet
1939–1940

Ship	Type	Displacement	Main Armament	Completed
Ark Royal	aircraft carrier	27,000 tons full load	16 4.5-inch AA 48 2-pounder AA 72 aircraft	1938
Rodney	battleship	38,000 tons full load	9 16-inch 12 6-inch 6 4.7-inch AA 8 2-pounder AA	1927
Hood	battle cruiser	48,000 tons full load	8 15-inch 8 5.5-inch 8 4-inch AA 24 2-pounder AA	1920
Norfolk	heavy cruiser	14,900 tons full load	8 8-inch 8 4-inch 8 21-inch torpedo tubes	1930
Calcutta	light cruiser	5200 tons full load	8 4-inch AA 4 2-pounder AA	Conv. to AA cruiser 1938–1939
Aurora	light cruiser	6665 tons full load	6 6-inch 8 4-inch 6 21-inch torpedo tubes	1937
Afridi	destroyer	1870 tons full load	8 4.7-inch 4 2-pounder AA 4 21-inch torpedo tubes	1937

The Home Fleet's battleships *Nelson* and *Rodney* represented the results of horse trading at the Washington Naval Conference of 1921–22.[9] The conference had been called to avert a naval arms race in the wake of World War I. Uncertainty about the future, along with momentum created by wartime building programs in the United States and Japan, threatened a return to the frenzy of fleet construction that had plagued the prewar world and helped fuel the crisis of 1914. The major naval powers—Britain, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy—therefore agreed to a ten-year building "holiday" (in which no battleships would be laid down) and set the ratio of capital-ship tonnage among them at (respectively) 5 : 5 : 3 : 1.76 : 1.76. Great Britain and the United States would have parity in battleship tonnage, Japan 60 percent of that figure, France and Italy proportionately less. The treaty prevented an arms race, but at a major cost to the United Kingdom: Britannia now had to share the waves, not rule them. One important concession the Admiralty delegation won was permission to

build two new 16-inch-gun battleships to match the three American and two Japanese ships armed with this caliber ordnance. These ships, which became *Nelson* and *Rodney*, were heavily influenced by the experience gained at Jutland, sacrificing speed for gun power (nine 16-inch guns and twelve 6-inch guns) and heavy armor protection (a 14-inch belt).

After their completion in 1926, an extension of the building holiday included in the 1930 London Naval Treaty precluded the construction of any new battleships for another five years. This led to the running down of the specialized industrial base for the production of armor, weapons, and turrets. When rearmament came in the late 1930s, these industries needed time to restart. Thus, Britain went to war in 1939 with a battle fleet of largely World War I vintage.

The London Naval Treaty also led to a suspension of the construction of 8-inch gun cruisers by the signatories and set a limit on overall cruiser tonnage allowed to each. To maximize the number of cruisers available for its trade routes, Britain decided to build many vessels of a design smaller (approximately six thousand tons) and armed with fewer guns than the light cruisers of other naval powers (especially the *Mogami* and *Brooklyn* classes). Most of the Home Fleet's cruisers were fine, modern ships, but many of those at sea at the opening of hostilities on the Northern Patrol enforcing the immediately declared blockade of Germany were obsolescent light cruisers of the C and D classes, laid down at the end of the First World War. Britain's modern (post-1926) destroyers, though somewhat smaller than their foreign counterparts, were capable, more numerous than those of any other navy, and aggressively commanded.

By comparison, the German navy's surface fleet on the outbreak of war consisted of two powerful, thirty-five-thousand-ton battle cruisers, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, and three thirteen-thousand-ton "pocket battleships"; two 8-inch-gun heavy cruisers and six 5.9-inch-gun light cruisers; and twenty-two modern destroyers. Germany's two battle cruisers were armed with nine 11-inch guns in three triple turrets, while the "pocket battleships" carried six 11-inch guns in two turrets and had an enormous endurance for commerce raiding, thanks to their advanced diesel engines. A crucial advantage that accrued to the Germans from having started their navy from scratch in the 1930s was the more advanced engine designs of that period. Their modern machinery produced much greater horsepower per ton than that in older British warships, thus increasing speed and saving weight, which could be devoted to guns, armor, and fuel. On the blocks were two battleships (*Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*), one aircraft carrier (*Graf Zeppelin*), three heavy cruisers (one to be sold to the Soviet Union), three light cruisers, and eight destroyers. Although not nearly ready for a full-blown confrontation with the Royal Navy, the large, fast, and modern German ships were a serious threat to the Home Fleet, which could command

only a portion of the Royal Navy's resources because of British imperial commitments in the Mediterranean, the Far East, and on the trade routes.

By comparison, the Home Fleet was afflicted with two major handicaps. The principal one was a lack of speed. German surface raiders, by definition, enjoyed the initiative; they chose when, and under what weather conditions, to make their dashes for the Atlantic. The Home Fleet (with the ardent, if inadequate, help of a few squadrons from RAF Coastal Command) was charged with finding these raiders and sinking them.[10] But the slowest German commerce raiders, the three "pocket battleships," could make twenty-six knots, whereas Forbes's fastest battleships, *Nelson* and *Rodney*, could manage only twenty-three. If the German ships got any kind of "jump" on the British, it would be very difficult to catch them. Only torpedo attacks by submarines, destroyers, or Fleet Air Arm Swordfish could hope to damage a German warship and thereby allow the battleships to intervene and deliver the coup de grace. Even the battle cruiser force was inadequate in this respect; *Renown*, *Repulse*, and *Hood* were all three or four knots slower than the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. This gave the Germans a distinct tactical as well as strategic advantage; it not only made breaking out into the Atlantic easier but implied that German ships could accept or refuse combat at will, a prospect frustrating to the British, who always wanted to "engage the enemy more closely."

Added to this offensive handicap was the equally vexing defensive problem of an inadequately defended main base. Scapa Flow, in the Orkneys, had during the interwar period suffered a low priority; money and resources were invested in the fleet base at Singapore. Later, with the rise of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, attention was switched to waters closer to home, but the Abyssinian crisis of 1935–36 made it plain to the Admiralty that the base at Malta was too vulnerable to Italian air attack; Alexandria would have to be fitted out so that the Mediterranean Fleet could operate from there. Therefore, when the Home Fleet was sent to its wartime station at Scapa Flow during the Czech crisis of September 1938, the base was found to be wholly unready.[11] In fact, on 8 October Admiral Forbes wrote to Backhouse, the First Sea Lord, that no teleprinter or other landline communication existed at the "base." He could not even tell the boom operators who controlled the antisubmarine nets guarding the main channel that his ships were proceeding to sea.[12] Forbes at that time also asked that continuous Coastal Command patrols over the North Sea be readied in case of a future crisis. Backhouse replied that such patrols were not feasible, adding somewhat oddly that they were probably not a good use of the RAF's limited resources.[13] These resources had been devoted in the 1930s to Bomber Command, and, at Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's urging, Fighter Command; Coastal Command and the Fleet Air Arm (then under RAF control) were both treated as poor relations, living off the scraps from the Air Ministry's table.

A desultory series of letters between the Admiralty and the flag officers in Scotland and the Orkneys charged with the defense of Scapa Flow followed the 1938 mobilization.[14] The possibility of a submarine passing over or around the hulks that had been sunk during the First World War to block various openings to the anchorage was considered, and plans were put in hand to add more such blockships. However, hiring an agent to buy and then sink the ships (all under peacetime rules for budgeting and procurement) was expensive and time consuming.[15] On 12 February 1939 it was determined that Water Sound and Kirk Sound were, respectively, possibly and definitely passable for submarines or small torpedo boats.[16] Two blockships were added to the defenses, one in February and one in March, but the problem was not nearly solved. Admiral Forbes requested that the antisubmarine boom defenses be doubled and wanted more blockships emplaced. He told the Admiralty, in a letter dated 28 June 1939: "Unless these channels [at Water and Kirk Sounds] are effectively blocked the C-in-C at Scapa in war time cannot be free from anxiety as to the safety of his ships from submarine or destroyer attack."[17] The Admiralty informed Forbes that one line of booms was sufficient and (possibly to discourage further requests) that the cost of a more adequate defense would be two hundred thousand pounds, a huge sum in those days.[18]

Given its limited resources, the Admiralty seems to have wagered that it would have time after mobilization to set things right. The gamble was to cost 833 British sailors their lives when Guenther Prien took *U-47* into Scapa Flow at night on the surface and sank the battleship *Royal Oak*. To his credit, Forbes had stubbornly pestered the Admiralty about the conditions at Scapa, insisting that antisubmarine detection devices like magnetic loops and contact mines be installed to strengthen the fleet base's defenses.[19] But the British simply did not have the money or industrial capacity to keep up their rearmament program, expand the Fleet Air Arm, and properly defend all their important naval bases scattered about the globe.

Forbes was thus hindered in the performance of his primary function in Allied grand strategy by both the slow speed of the Home Fleet's aging major warships and the vulnerability of the main fleet base at Scapa Flow. This role has been well delineated by the Royal Navy's official historian:

> The essential naval task was to protect the merchant ships carrying the cargoes on which depended the economy of the Allied Powers and their capacity to make war. In 1914 the need had been the same, but there had been a formidable High Seas Fleet in German waters ready to sally out and challenge British control at any moment. . . . Now, the Germans had no High Seas Fleet, only a few capital ships in numbers insignificant compared with those of the Allies; but the last war had shown how much damage could be done to commerce by a few

> raiders skillfully employed. The British Admiralty expected that Germany would exploit this form of warfare to the full. Their policy was to place the main fleet where it could give covering protection to shipping, and accordingly the strongest British naval concentration, including most of the heavy ships, was based, as in the earlier war, at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys.[20]

British naval strategy was, therefore, essentially defensive: the Home Fleet was to protect British shipping and deny Atlantic access to Germany. Unfortunately, the new First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, found this defensive stance anathema. His restless temperament was to play a key role in the major commitment of Home Fleet resources to an ill-advised campaign in Norway in the spring of 1940.[21] Had any naval offensive been contemplated in late 1939, it would have been hindered by the weakness of the Fleet Air Arm. The Royal Navy had four true fleet carriers in 1939, with a maximum combined aircraft complement of approximately 180 planes.[22] The entire Fleet Air Arm numbered 232 frontline aircraft in September 1939, and its squadrons were flying obsolescent aircraft like the Skua, Sea Gladiator, and Swordfish.

Better suited to offensive action was the tactical doctrine of the Home Fleet, codified in the Fighting Instructions of 1939. These had been jointly developed by Forbes and Pound while Pound was still Commander in Chief, Mediterranean Fleet. They descended from the Grand Fleet Battle Orders, the Battle Cruiser Fleet Standing Orders, and the Grand Fleet Battle Instructions of the 1914–18 war.[23] However, the new Fighting Instructions were far more flexible than their predecessors. Whereas the tactical doctrine of World War I had been built around a complex series of rigidly executed signal orders and stylized maneuvers en masse, the doctrine of 1939 stressed improvisation and initiative on the part of all captains and squadron commanders. The new ethos is made plain on the first page:

> Captains, whenever they find themselves without specific directions during an action or are faced with unforeseen circumstances which render previous orders inapplicable, must act as their judgment dictates to further their Admiral's wishes. Care should be taken when framing instructions, that these are not of too rigid a nature.[24]

The prevailing spirit was one of the *tactical offensive.* Attacks were to be pressed home vigorously and to close range: "At such a range the superior fighting qualities and stamina of the British race should tell, as they have so often in the past."[25] Combat at night, or against superior numbers, was not to be refused. Thus, within a defensive strategic framework, offensive tactics were to be employed whenever possible.

The maneuvering of a large fleet of battleships, however, was not ignored. In fact, the stated function of the Royal Navy's battleships remained what it had been in 1914, or even 1805: "The Objective of the battlefleet is the destruction of the enemy's battlefleet by gunfire."[26] Even in 1939, this was far from a hidebound premise.[27] Throughout the interwar period, officers of every major naval power had dreamed about, and rehearsed for, a repeat of a clash of fleets in the style of Jutland (the "battle fleet concept").[28] The United States, France, Italy, and Japan all maintained large battle fleets in 1939, and Germany was trying hard to build one. U.S. and Japanese planners both envisioned a major clash of battle fleets within weeks of the outbreak of hostilities.[29] (That is why so many of America's battleships were to be at Pearl Harbor in December 1941.) Pound thought that blueprints for a major fleet action should be left in the Fighting Instructions in case of a showdown with the Japanese.[30] An American gunnery officer on the battleship USS *Washington*, which was serving with the Home Fleet in 1942, commented later on the Royal Navy's ideal of the tactical handling of battleships: "Their idea of what to do was to head in there just as fast as they could to about ten thousand yards, which for big guns is like shooting a rifle across the room, and letting the enemy have it. This idea of closing the enemy and shooting it out in the Nelsonian tradition was certainly firmly implanted."[31]

But the Fighting Instructions were much more than a rehash of Jutland. Simple principles were laid down for four types of engagement: action between fleets sailing on parallel courses; action between fleets sailing on opposite courses; pursuit of a retreating enemy; and lastly, extrication from a lost battle.[32] The doctrine stressed the need for reconnaissance, for reporting to superiors all information about any enemy force that could be obtained, and for shadowing enemy vessels until superior strength could be brought to bear. It also included instructions for the employment of aircraft carriers. Carrier doctrine was stated simply: top priority would be to "deny the use of aircraft to the enemy" by sinking his carriers.[33] Priority number two was scouting out the enemy battle fleet and then launching a strike in order to damage its ships, slowing them prior to a fleet engagement.[34]

Overall, the Home Fleet in 1939 was blessed, compared to the Grand Fleet of the First World War, with a tactical doctrine that made the most of the limited resources available to it. The Fighting Instructions were uncomplicated, based on principles rather than set evolutions; they implied on every page that bold actions would be rewarded and that the rote carrying out of orders would be insufficient. Furthermore, Admiral Forbes was never wedded to a rigid "battle fleet concept"; in fact, within two weeks of the outbreak of war the command structure of the Home Fleet (as outlined in Table 1) was scrapped, and a system of groups (similar to the famous American task forces of the Pacific War) was introduced.[35] These groups had no permanent existence but were drawn from the pool of ships of any type available at any given time, depending on the

job envisioned, to perform a specific function. They would usually be led by one of Forbes's flag officers. This flexibility was necessary in hunting down enemy surface forces, whose main preoccupation was—at least in their early operations—sinking merchant ships while avoiding engagement with the Royal Navy.

A serious threat to the smooth and flexible tactical system laid down in the Fighting Instructions came from the improved shore-to-ship communications made possible by wireless telegraphy. Interference in the handling of a squadron at sea by shore-based admirals was nothing new; in 1910, Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson had "virtually usurped tactical control" of a force of Home Fleet ships on maneuvers off Portugal.[36] The closer a force was to Britain, the more information was available not only to its commander but also, simultaneously, to the First Lord and First Sea Lord. Reports from scouting planes and cruisers could be heard in London at the same time they were picked up at Scapa Flow. Signals intelligence was more often than not in the hands of the Admiralty before it was available to the commanding officers directly affected. Thus the temptation to interfere in the operations of the Home Fleet—because "we know better"—and issue specific instructions to formations or even individual ships became profound. Little that is more stifling to the healthy exercise of the initiative can be imagined than the fear that the Admiralty was looking over one's shoulder and might issue direct orders, from over the head of one's nominal superior, at any time. Dudley Pound wasted little time after his appointment as First Sea Lord in making it clear to Admiral Forbes that he was prepared to intervene directly in Forbes's tactical handling of the Home Fleet.[37] Forbes answered in the strongest possible terms: "I would point out, however, that it must be left to my discretion at the time whether or not I carry out these [Admiralty] orders, in the same way that Captains are given this discretion in Clauses 2 and 6 of Section I of the Fighting Instructions."[38]

Thus, one of the coauthors (Forbes) of the Fighting Instructions used the other's (Pound's) own words against him. Forbes went on to point out that if he were at sea under radio silence, the Admiralty might have little idea where exactly he was; for it to issue sailing instructions (as opposed to intelligence updates) could be unhelpful, even disastrous. There the debate ended. At the top of Forbes's file copy of his reply the words "never answered" appear in pencil, in what seems to be Forbes's own hand.

It is known, however, that Forbes failed to convince Pound that Admiralty intervention in tactical operations was counterproductive; the evidence is another piece of correspondence written a month later. In it, Admiral Pound explained to Rear Admiral L. E. Holland, at that time commanding the Channel Force, the conditions under which, and the extent to which, Pound believed he should intervene in the normal chain of command.[39] "All commands are treated alike," Pound remarked, "even the Home Fleet." Thus the command

descended from the Grand Fleet was to have no special status under the Pound regime. Nor was its commander in chief, once so close to the First Sea Lord's chair, to have any special prerogatives. Pound spelled out to Admiral Holland his principles: "1) If the C-in-C of an area has sufficient forces, then we [the Admiralty] give him all the information we have and leave him to it; 2) if the C-in-C has not sufficient forces, then we send him reinforcements and tell him they are coming and he gives them their orders; 3) every C-in-C sends his forces to sea and orders them to return when he likes." These three stipulations seem to be in keeping with the spirit of the Fighting Instructions, but there was a catch: "Naturally, I reserve the right to butt in if I consider it necessary, but I should never do so if it could possibly be avoided." In the operations off Norway in 1940, and in his order to scatter convoy PQ17, Pound was to invoke this right—with serious consequences in the first case, catastrophic ones in the second.[40]

In the late summer of 1939, with the crisis over Danzig looming ever larger and the Nonaggression Pact of 23 August between Hitler and Stalin guaranteeing that Poland would get no help from the East, the Home Fleet was mobilized for war. On 31 August, before war was declared, before Nazi Germany had invaded Poland, Forbes took the Home Fleet to sea. He swept the North Sea almost to the Norwegian coast and instructed the Battle Cruiser Squadron to be ready for detached service, shadowing any German warships encountered.[41] On 1 September the Admiralty sent a "warning telegram" informing Forbes that war was imminent, with Germany and Italy the potential enemies.[42]

The commencement of operations in anticipation of war revealed another grave deficiency that would plague the Home Fleet—the alarming inadequacy of British naval signals intelligence. For example, after Forbes's North Sea sweep, the Admiralty told him that the Germans had collected a force of one battle cruiser, two pocket battleships, one heavy cruiser, and one light cruiser in Icelandic waters.[43] Admiral Forbes dutifully took the Home Fleet into the Atlantic, sailing for two days to a position 58 degrees 15 minutes north, 20 degrees west, but found nothing. In fact, no such force was at sea; Germany at that time had only two pocket battleships deployed in the whole Atlantic Ocean.[44] After its foray into the Atlantic, the Home Fleet was directed to follow up a new intelligence lead: German warships were reported leaving Wilhemshaven, perhaps for a sortie into the North Sea. So Forbes took his ships back through the Fair Isle Channel between the Shetlands and the Orkneys. Again, British ships searched an empty sea. After cruising for a week through thick fog east of the Orkneys, the Home Fleet returned to Scapa Flow, at 7:00 A.M. on 6 September. Three days before, the message "TOTAL GERMANY" had been flashed to the fleet: Britain was at war with its great continental rival for the second time in a generation. The log of the Home Fleet's flagship, HMS *Nelson*, for 3 September 1939, 11:17 A.M., read simply, "War declared on Germany."[45]

The searches had been in vain. British naval intelligence officials had no clear idea where the German navy's ships and submarines were. From the beginning of the war, and for months to come, British intelligence failed Admiral Forbes.[46] The deciphering of German codes was the responsibility of the Government Code and Cypher School, based at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire.[47] Although later renowned for its ULTRA decrypts, the cryptanalysts at Bletchley Park had no early success against the German navy's coding machine, ENIGMA. German naval communications, with the exception of a few tiny windows, were immune to all efforts by the British code breakers to read them until the spring of 1941.[48] The Germans, early in the war, were able to decipher partially the British naval codes, but for the British the list of failures by their code breakers is staggering:

> But when there was thus a heavy premium on obtaining early warning of sorties by warships and surface raiders, and of the departure and patrol areas of U-boats, no such indications were forthcoming from those in the OIC [Operational Intelligence Centre] who maintained plots of enemy surface ships and U-boats, as also of German mine-laying operations. No sign whatever betrayed Captain Prien's penetration of Scapa Flow in *U-47* in October 1939 . . . or the return of the *Deutschland* to Germany in November . . . or the sortie of the *Gneisenau* and the *Scharnhorst* in which, in the same month, they sank the *Rawalpindi*; or the next sortie of these battle-cruisers with the *Hipper*, in February 1940, which was, however, cut short by a chance sighting by an aircraft of Bomber Command.[49]

Decrypted messages were to have been passed along from the code breakers to the OIC at the Admiralty and thence to the commanders at sea.[50] But nothing was passing through the system. The Admiralty instead depended on spies and guesswork, which led to debacles like Forbes's chase from the Norwegian coast to Iceland and back after a phantom enemy. "The OIC's first war-time report to the Home Fleet, to the effect that the German Fleet might have moved to Icelandic waters just before the declaration of war, had turned out to be wrong, as had a sighting by a Coastal Command aircraft on 3 September which reported that German major units were apparently leaving harbor."[51] This chronic lack of proper intelligence information must be kept in mind when one assesses the actions, or inaction, of Forbes and his subordinates.

With so little useful intelligence information coming from the OIC, the Home Fleet depended on the direct sighting of enemy ships by Coastal Command aircraft and Royal Navy submarines. Daylight flights were instituted out of Montrose in Scotland to near the edge of Norwegian territorial waters. From these waters ran a British patrol line of five submarines sixty miles out into the

North Sea, with a further six boats patrolling the German Bight.[52] Coastal Command, however, had only some 170 operational aircraft in the whole United Kingdom, a number insufficient for reconnaissance and convoy protection around the entire British Isles. Most of these planes were slow, short range, and obsolescent, like the twin-engined Anson and Hudson bombers. Therefore, Coastal Command could not compensate for the OIC's deficiencies. Bomber Command had top priority and kept it throughout the war; the Navy had to do with what little it had and trust to luck.[53]

More bad intelligence was received by the Home Fleet commander on 9 September. The Admiralty informed Forbes that eight hundred German bombers were being massed for an attack on Scapa Flow.[54] Preparations were accordingly put in hand to move the Home Fleet to an emergency anchorage at Loch Ewe, on the west coast of Scotland. Meanwhile, just to be safe, the fleet went to sea. Forbes divided it into two groups: *Nelson*, *Rodney*, *Repulse*, *Ark Royal*, *Aurora*, *Sheffield*, and ten destroyers sailed on 7 September for a patrol station off Norway; *Hood*, *Renown*, *Edinburgh*, *Belfast*, and four destroyers sailed on the 8th to sweep the area between the Faeroe Islands and Iceland.[55] The first group returned to Scapa Flow on the night of 10 September, while the second returned at noon on the 12th after encountering "a good deal of fog." Most of these ships were deployed to Loch Ewe by 15 September, because of continued fear of massive Luftwaffe attack.[56]

The threat to the Home Fleet did not come just from the air but also from under the sea—from U-boats. Britain did not have enough escorts to deal with this menace (admittedly, no navy of the period did). On 11 September, *Ark Royal* and four F-class destroyers of the 8th Destroyer Flotilla were sent out to hunt German submarines. Such "offensive" antisubmarine sweeps were a popular tactic during the early days of the war. This hunting group managed to sink the submarine *U-39* on 14 September, but *Ark Royal* itself narrowly escaped being sunk that same day by a salvo of torpedoes fired by *U-30*. The carrier *Courageous* was not so lucky; it was sunk by *U-29* during an antisubmarine patrol on 17 September.[57] The Admiralty quickly realized that vital assets like fleet carriers could not be risked in such a manner and ordered that *Ark Royal* no longer be used on antisubmarine sweeps.[58] A 19 September sweep by ten destroyers caught and sank the *U-27*.[59]

The big air assault on Scapa Flow never materialized, but ships on patrol did face Luftwaffe attacks. On 25 September, the 2d Cruiser Squadron (2CS), consisting of the *Southampton*, *Glasgow* (both with twelve 6-inch guns), and six destroyers under the command of Vice Admiral George Edward-Collins was patrolling off the coast of Norway when it received a distress signal from the submarine HMS *Spearfish*, operating in the German Bight. The ships of 2CS immediately steered south to assist, and the Home Fleet sailed in support. That day a Dornier Do-18 flying boat sighted the Home Fleet steaming east. The

Do-18 was shot down by a Skua operating from *Ark Royal* (becoming thereby the first plane ever shot down by a carrier-based aircraft), but on the 26th, German bombers attacked the combined forces of Forbes and Edward-Collins at 57 degrees 49 minutes north, 1 degree 55 minutes east.[60] *Ark Royal*, *Hood*, *Aurora*, and *Sheffield* were all subjected to aerial bombardment. Forbes reported minimal damage from near misses, the only serious exception a glancing blow off *Hood*'s main armor belt. But, Forbes also noted, his ships' antiaircraft fire had been "ineffective."[61] The fire control system of British antiaircraft guns was proving a failure. This left the Home Fleet—with few aircraft carriers available, and these without modern fighters or adequate fighter direction—extremely vulnerable to air attack.

Another false alarm from the OIC anticipating a powerful air attack sent Forbes scurrying to sea on 8 October. He divided his fleet into four separate "task forces" to sweep the North Sea and its exits to the Atlantic: *Hood*, *Repulse*, *Aurora*, *Sheffield*, and four destroyers; a Humber Force of three 6-inch cruisers; *Nelson*, *Rodney*, *Furious*, *Newcastle*, and eight destroyers; and *Royal Oak* and two destroyers. After another futile search, during which no German warships were discovered, most of the Home Fleet's ships returned to their base at Loch Ewe, while *Royal Oak* and two escorting destroyers anchored at Scapa Flow. There the battleship was sunk by the German submarine *U-47* on the night of 14 October.[62]

Late in 1939, Forbes lost the services of *Ark Royal*, *Renown*, the heavy cruisers *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*, and the old cruisers *Effingham*, *Emerald*, and *Enterprise*—the latter ships, in his words, "the only 3 Northern Patrol cruisers with satisfactory endurance."[63] The *Graf Spee* was loose in the South Atlantic, and Churchill, as the First Lord of the Admiralty, wanted it sunk; these powerful units were dispatched to join the hunt. As would often be the case in the future, the Home Fleet acted as the Navy's "floating reserve," from which units were detached at frequent intervals to reinforce other commands or for special operations. *Furious* replaced *Ark Royal* (hardly an even swap);[64] the light cruiser *Newcastle* joined the Home Fleet; and a combined total of five old C and D–class light cruisers were sent as reinforcements for the Northern Patrol.[65] Britain's lack of sufficient modern naval forces meant that if one theater needed reinforcing, some other command would have to suffer.

The first six weeks of hostilities were replete with frustration for the officers and men of the Home Fleet. They neither engaged nor sank any enemy surface vessels, though certainly not for want of trying: they spent many anxious hours at sea but consistently came back to harbor with nothing to show. Their organization and tactical doctrine were sound, yet weaknesses in aerial reconnaissance and signals intelligence were crippling. On top of this, leadership at the Admiralty was suspect. Certainly, Sir Charles Forbes acted intelligently, given his

miserably inadequate intelligence, and his knowledge of his profession and his will to close with the enemy were unquestionable. Still, he was probably better suited to the job of First Sea Lord, which was instead held by the considerably less competent Dudley Pound. British cruisers and destroyers were good, British officers and men brave and able, but the battle fleet was old and slow compared with what the German navy was putting to sea, not to mention what the Germans were likely to send to sea in the next two years. German ships were, in most cases, newer, faster, better armed, and more capable of taking punishment than their British equivalents. Only in light cruisers was the Royal Navy clearly superior. The legacy of naval arms treaties (notably an inadequate industrial plant for armor plate and gun mountings) and lack of money had so slowed the rearmament program that by 1939 the Royal Navy was short of modern capital ships (battleships and carriers).

Therefore, we can summarize the Royal Navy's deficiencies, and their impact on the Home Fleet, as follows: without sufficient aerial reconnaissance (carrier and land-based) and signals intelligence, the Home Fleet was largely blind; with a core of slow battleships, its responses were sluggish; because of its worldwide commitments and Britain's economic limitations, the Royal Navy could not give Forbes the ships and the secure, well supplied base that would have allowed him to offset his disadvantages by keeping simultaneously at sea several task forces, finding and sinking German warships on their own; finally, whether Dudley Pound or Winston Churchill made best use of the Navy's limited resources can be debated. All these factors degraded the performance of Admiral Forbes's Home Fleet in the first months of World War II.

As in the First World War, much of the German navy sat in port; only submarines and a few raiders put to sea, determined to disrupt Britain's maritime trade. The failure of the Germans to come out and fight (reflecting an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the Royal Navy) was galling to the British. Yet even this period of frustration was, for the Home Fleet, simply a prelude to trials as great as any experienced by the Royal Navy in its long history. Ready or not, the Home Fleet had an important role to play in Allied strategy. Overall, in the first weeks of war Admiral Forbes and his men performed that role more than adequately, considering the handicaps under which they labored. In time, the weaknesses would be rectified, but beginning with the loss of *Royal Oak* and for months thereafter, they would add disaster to frustration and leave the Home Fleet, and Britain, not striving for victory, but struggling for survival.[66]

Notes

1. This section is based on information in ADM 196/45, p. 219 (Forbes's naval record), Admiralty records, Public Record Office, London; *The Dictionary of National Biography 1960* for Forbes, and *The Dictionary of National Biography 1940* for Backhouse.

2. Quotations are from letter Sir G. Style to Roskill, 10 March 1979, in the Roskill Papers, file 4/50, Churchill Archive Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge University.

3. See Robin Brodhurst's chapter on Pound in Malcolm Murfett, *The First Sea Lords: From Fisher to Mountbatten* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995), esp. p. 186.

4. Quotation from Correlli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely* (London: Hudder and Stoughton, 1991), p. 51.

5. Stephen Roskill, in *Naval Policy between the Wars*, vol. 2 (London: Collins, 1976), p. 466, argues that Chatfield or Forbes could have been given the post of First Sea Lord; Robin Brodhurst, in *The First Sea Lords*, pp. 186–7, holds that Pound was the only logical appointee.

6. Tovey to Roskill, 1 January 1962, Roskill Papers, file 4/17.

7. The pool was artificially small, however. Admirals of the Fleet Lord Cork, Keyes, and Drax each had his own weaknesses, and they were all considered too long retired to take the First Sea Lord's chair. Admiral William W. Fisher, a former C-in-C Mediterranean and likely candidate, had died in 1937. Bertram Ramsey had left active service in 1935 after a dispute with Backhouse, who, as we have seen, died prematurely. James Somerville had been invalided out of the service in 1938 due to illness, while Andrew Cunningham was considered too junior, and Charles Little was too closely associated with Lord Chatfield and with his support of the increasingly unpopular policy of appeasement.

8. For details of the British and German navies in 1939, see Roger Chesneau, *Conway's All the World's Warships 1922–1946* (New York: Mayflower Books, 1980). For more specific information, see H. T. Lenton and J. J. Colledge, *British and Dominion Warships of World War II* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968). For the German navy, see J. C. Taylor, *German Warships of World War II* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1966). These are the sources for Table 2.

9. For an introductory look at the Washington Naval Treaty, see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, rev. paperback ed. (London: Ashfield Press, 1995), pp. 274–83; for the Treaty cruisers, see E. H. H. Archibald, *The Fighting Ships of the Royal Navy* (New York: Military Press, 1987), pp. 213–7; for the details of *Nelson* and *Rodney*, Alan Raven and John Roberts, *British Battleships of World War II* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1976), pp. 107–27.

10. At the outset of hostilities, Coastal Command had about 170 operational aircraft for employment throughout the entire United Kingdom. See Basil Collier, *The Defense of the United Kingdom* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office [HMSO], 1957), p. 59.

11. This section is drawn from a close reading of ADM 116/3831.

12. Forbes to Backhouse, 8 October 1938, ADM 205/3.

13. Backhouse to Forbes, 18 October 1938, ibid.

14. Correspondence in ADM 116/3831.

15. Correspondence between Admiralty and Commanding Officer Coast of Scotland, 3 May 1938, 1 July 1939; and Metal Industries, Ltd., to Admiralty, 18 January 1939; all in ADM 116/3831.

16. Lawson to Commanding Officer Coast of Scotland, 12 February 1939, ibid.

17. Forbes to Admiralty, 28 June 1939, ibid.

18. Admiralty to Forbes, 2 August 1939, ibid.

19. Forbes to Admiralty, 25 September 1939, ibid.

20. Quotation from J. R. M. Butler, *Grand Strategy*, vol. 2 (London: HMSO, 1957), p. 14.

21. For a positive take on this "offensive-mindedness," see Arthur Marder's famous "Winston's Back," in his *From the Dardanelles to Oran* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974).

22. For the Fleet Air Arm, see John Winton, *Find, Fix and Strike!* (London: Batsford, 1980), pp. 2–3; for its strength, see Norman Friedman, *British Carrier Aviation* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988), app. B; for the planes, see Owen Thetford, *British Naval Aircraft since 1912* (London: Putnam, 1962).

23. For a detailed discussion of the tactical fighting systems promulgated during the First World War, see Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game* (London: John Murray, 1996), esp. pp. 55, 517–9, and 527–9.

24. The Fighting Instructions are listed as ADM 239/261, Public Records Office, London.

25. ADM 239/261, p. 11.

26. Ibid., p. 62.

27. For a discussion that argues for the continued value of the battlefleet in 1939 and beyond, see Jon Sumida, "'The Best Laid Plans': The Development of British Battle-Fleet Tactics, 1919–1942," *International History Review*, November 1992, pp. 681–700. Robert L. O'Connell, *Sacred Vessels: The Cult of the Battleship and the Rise of the U.S. Navy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), maintains the opposite, that the persistence of the battleship was due to the unique culture of naval officers, their nostalgia for the sailing ship of the line, and the appeal to the public of such impressive-looking vessels. Although this may well have been a contributing factor to the blind attachment of some officers (like Tom Phillips) for the battleship, this author tends to side with Sumida.

28. For the persistence of the "battlefleet concept," see Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars*, vol. 2, esp. pp. 430–1, 475.

29. As the Japanese naval historian Kiyoshi Ikeda has noted, as late as March 1941 "Japanese naval strategic and tactical thought was firmly based on the traditional concept of the primacy of heavy surface units [i.e., battleships]." Quoted from Stephen Howarth, ed., *Men of War: Great Naval Leaders of World War II* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1992), p. 297.

30. See Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran*, pp. 53–4. For additional insight into the reigning tactical doctrine and the continued anxiety over a battlefleet showdown with Japan, see Gordon, pp. 574–6.

31. Lieutenant (later Vice Admiral) Edwin Hooper, quoted in Ivan Musicant, *Battleship at War: The Epic Story of the U.S.S.* Washington (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p. 39.

32. ADM 239/261, pp. 53–7, 67–73.

33. Ibid., p. 49.

34. Ibid.

35. See the lists of unit organization as they changed from week to week, in ADM 187/1.

36. Gordon, p. 369.

37. The letter, along with Forbes's response, can be found in the Library of the British Museum, Add. Ms. 52565 (Cunningham Papers), Pound to Forbes, 18 August 1939.

38. Quotation from Forbes to Pound, 22 August 1939, Add. Ms. 52565, British Museum Library.

39. Pound to Holland, 25 October 1939, ADM 205/3.

40. For Norway, see Stephen Roskill, *Churchill and the Admirals* (London: Collins, 1977), pp. 96–107; for specific examples from the Norwegian campaign, see the record of communications sent and received by the C-in-C, Home Fleet, ADM 199/361; for the PQ17 fiasco, see Dan van der Vat's *The Atlantic Campaign* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), pp. 283–7.

41. ADM 199/393, p. 7.

42. Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars*, vol. 2, p. 484.

43. ADM 199/393, p. 7.

44. For the position of German naval units at the onset of hostilities, see Stephen Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. 1 (London: HMSO, 1954), p. 591.

45. Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars*, vol. 2, p. 485.

46. The Official History of British Intelligence, F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, vol. 1 (London: HMSO, 1979), pp. 103–107.

47. For the organization of British intelligence at the opening of the Second World War, see ibid., pp. 3–43.

48. Ibid., p. 103.

49. Ibid., p. 105.

50. For a popular history of the OIC by an officer who served in it, see Patrick Beesly, *Very Special Intelligence* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), esp. pp. 25–43.

51. Hinsley, p. 106.

52. ADM 199/393, p. 8.

53. The whole lamentable tale of the struggle to pry sufficient resources from Bomber Command for Coastal Command can be read in van der Vat.

54. ADM 199/393, p. 8. The actual strength of the Luftwaffe formations trained in antishipping tactics was, on 9 September 1939, eighty-five aircraft, of which seventy-one were serviceable. These figures are from Collier, p. 80.

55. ADM 199/393, p. 8.

56. Ibid., p. 10.

57. Van der Vat, pp. 86–7; Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz, *Memoirs* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), pp. 55–6, gives the date of the sinking as 19 September.

58. ADM 199/393, p. 9.

59. Ibid., p. 10.

60. For the Do-18 incident, Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. 1, p. 69.

61. ADM 199/393, pp. 11–2.

62. For an account of *U-47*'s raid on Scapa Flow, see Doenitz, pp. 68–70, and ADM 199/158, esp. pp. 76–82.

63. ADM 199/393, p. 13.

64. *Furious* at that time was operating eighteen Swordfish of 816 and 818 Squadrons; *Ark Royal* had disembarked part of her air group but still carried twenty-four Swordfish and nine Skuas on her trek south. See ADM 187/3.

65. ADM 199/393, p. 13.

66. Forbes led his fleet well in the Norwegian campaign of April–June 1940, despite German air superiority, a false sense in the opening hours of what was going on, and a combination of disputes with and interference from Pound and Churchill. In fact, he was made an admiral of the fleet after the German defeat in the second battle of Narvik. Forbes remained calm and confident throughout the summer of 1940, sure that the Germans would never risk an invasion. He was rightly anxious, however, about the concentration of resources on home defense rather than convoy protection. His pestering of the Admiralty on this account and his anger at what he saw as the incorrect deployment of Royal Navy ships led to his early relief from his post, on 2 December 1940. Never again receiving a sea posting or a seat on the Board of Admiralty, he retired in 1943.

Ψ